

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – Year A

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – 12 February 2023

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Churches Together in Britain and Ireland for their order of service on Racial Justice Sunday, the sixth Sunday after Epiphany.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:
<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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Introduction

But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!
(Amos 5:24)

22 April 2023 marks the 30th anniversary of the racist killing of Black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, in Eltham, southeast London. In many respects, Racial Justice Sunday is one of the many legacies of Stephen Lawrence's life. As such, in marking RJS, churches are remembering a young man who in life aspired to be an architect, but whose legacy has seen him become an architect for justice, equality, dignity and unity.

This anniversary is a key moment for church and society on these islands. Stephen's killing was very much Britain's 'George Floyd moment' as it clearly revealed the ugly face of British racism, in terms not only of the hatred of those who took this young man's life, but also of the institutional variety that characterised the appalling investigation into his killing. Akin to all such tragedies, it is a moment for reflection which will enable us to assess what, if any, progress has been made since that tragedy.

Racial Justice Sunday resources are produced by CTBI's sponsoring churches. The resource for 2023 will provide readers with opportunities to pray and take action on racial justice-related matters.

The first part of the resource includes excellent liturgical and creative prayers prepared by Phill Mellstrom, the Worship Development Worker at the Church of Scotland. This material provides multifarious entry points for any engagement with the subject matter. Equally, we have outstanding worship-related material written by Mark Sturge, a prime mover with Black Majority Churches that will resonate especially with those from Pentecostal congregations. Both items capture the richness and diversity of devotions and worship in our churches.

[Racial Justice Sunday 2023 – Stephen Lawrence \(ctbi.org.uk\)](https://www.ctbi.org.uk)

The second part of the resource includes a variety of reflections from Christians who were around at the time of Stephen Lawrence's killing. It also features contributions from younger racial justice champions who reflect on what Stephen's murder means to them as Christians living in a world that is still grappling with racial justice.

Richard Reddie, Director of Justice and Inclusion, CTBI.

Order of Service

This Racial Justice Sunday Order of Service is prepared with Black Majority Churches in mind, and recognises that those most adversely affected by racism need to approach God on their own terms as children of God. Therefore, this Order of Service does not focus on anguish, annoyance, frustration or disappointment, but instead gazes on the grace of God. It imagines the freedom of living life in its fulness, without the limitations that racial prejudice imposes. It concentrates on Christ, who has placed His value in people of colour and clothes them in His worth.

Call to worship

A warm welcome to you here at [insert church name]. Today, churches the length and breadth of Britain and Ireland are marking Racial Justice Sunday.

As we worship, we remind ourselves of our duty towards each other – to be treated with dignity, respect and honour – because we are of infinite worth to God.

Racial Justice Sunday is not just an annual service; it is a signpost, a reminder, of how we should live the rest of the year and the rest of our lives.

Therefore, on this Racial Justice Sunday:

- We affirm our value in Christ;
- We affirm the humanity in which God has made us;
- We affirm the ethnicity in which God has moulded us;
- We affirm the gift we are to our families, communities and nations;
- We affirm that we are children of the Most High God.

Therefore, Let us come boldly before God's throne in prayer, worship and thanksgiving. Let us come in the rawness of our imperfections and with gratitude for Christ's forgiveness.

The congregation sings:

Be Still and Know

Be still and know that I am God,
Be still and know that I am God,
Be still and know that I am God.

I am the Lord that healeth thee,

I am the Lord that healeth thee,
I am the Lord that healeth thee.

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.

Prayer / Reading

In reverence of our mighty and everlasting God, who heals us, keeps our confidence, supports us in times of crisis and shares our joys, we say (pray) together:

Our God is King over all the earth.
Our God has made us a little lower than the angels.
Our God sent His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, into our unjust world.
Our Lord was rejected, suffered and died for our sins.
Our Lord rose again in triumph and ascended into heaven.
Our Lord now intercedes for us:
– for the forgiveness of our sin;
– for our faithfulness in adversity;
– for our welfare, well-being and wholeness;
– for our justice, mercy and grace.
Our Lord has sent His Holy Spirit
To help us, comfort us and guide us into all truth.
Come, Holy Spirit, help us, comfort us, guide us, we pray.
Amen

Hymns

- Restore, O Lord, the Honour of Your Name
- I am Thine, O Lord

Reflection

This is an opportunity to reflect on the life of Stephen Lawrence, or the life of someone who has been adversely affected by the issues of racial injustice. It might also be a moment to reflect on how our merciful God can turn a harmful situation or intent into a positive outcome.

It is important to be aware and acknowledge that some in the congregation may be experiencing or carrying deep hurt. The hope for today is not to prolong or stir up feelings but to promote wholeness and healing through testimony and song.

Suggested worship songs

- There Is None Holy as the Lord
- I Am Free
- I'm No Longer a Slave to Fear

Scripture Readings

Before reading the Scriptures, the reader might say: The 1804 Bible offered to 'Negro West Indians Slaves' omitted many chapters of the Bible that we have in our possession today. For example, the Book of Exodus contained only chapters 19 and 20; most chapters from Deuteronomy were omitted, including our text today; the entire Psalms and much more were also excluded. Therefore, as we read this passage today, we remind ourselves that God's faithfulness had been hidden from some generations (our ancestors). We remind ourselves that people of every nation, tribe and tongue need to hear the good news of Christ, have access to the whole counsel of Scripture and experience the power of God's Word. We read these words with confidence, humility and thankfulness; not as passive listeners but as sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ, who died to set us free from sin and reconcile us to God.

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#)

[1 Corinthians 3:1-9](#)

Sermon

You Are God's Field

Each of us has identity markers. Our gender, DNA, ethnicity, fingerprints, religion, marital status, sexuality, socioeconomic status, education, family, profession, illnesses, disabilities, etc., all contribute to defining us. These identities exist, first and foremost, because we are human beings created in the likeness of God.

Throughout our lives, we are enculturated to confirm and affirm our human identities. We learn and are expected to demonstrate that we belong to a particular community, group or

tribe. As we get older, we may challenge or affirm our tribe. We may choose to opt out of some identities and adopt new ones.

On the one hand, some parts of our identities, like our ethnicities, cannot be changed, even if they are used to demean or devalue us. On the other hand, we may choose to defend and protect our identities when they are attacked, abused, disrespected and devalued.

Make no mistake, each of us will be taking on and shedding new identities as long as we live.

Today our text brings into sharp focus our identity with Christ.

1 Corinthians 3 begins with the words, **‘And so’**.

This beginning should spark our curiosity because these are connecting words. **‘And so’** invites us to look in at least two directions. Looking forward, we might ask, ‘And so what?’

However, we are also invited to look backwards, to take a peep and see what happened or was said in chapter 2.

So, let’s go to chapter 2 for a brief moment.

Here, it seems, the Apostle Paul is laser-focused on the wisdom of this world and God’s wisdom. Worldly leaders, he suggests, do not understand God’s wisdom (verse 11). This is because God’s wisdom is revealed wisdom and can only be known through God’s Spirit (verse 12).

Yes! OK! But why is it so essential to make this distinction?

Well, I’m glad you asked.

One of the identity markers of Corinth was having wisdom. Corinth was a city where a person’s status was defined by knowledge, which was perceived as wisdom, public oration, wealth and class. The colour of one’s skin revealed whether someone worked in the sun or was protected from it. Even the calluses on a person’s hand were a giveaway that they were of a different status. Therefore, the Apostle Paul seems to be redefining what is valuable. He is distinguishing between what is valued by society or culture and what is valuable to God.

In doing so, he 'sets the cats among the pigeons', to use a metaphor. He potentially establishes a hostile environment. At the very least, a line of demarcation is placed between civic rulers who do not have God's wisdom and the people of God who have the gift of God's Spirit. There is an emphasis and a distinction between knowledge and knowing – knowledge comes from learning, tradition and experience; wisdom comes from God and is enabled by the Holy Spirit.

One way of reconciling these polarities or plurality of thought is through reflection or re-evaluation. The identities of people in this short chapter who would benefit from such a re-evaluation are:

- Those who are mature (2:6);
- The rulers of this age (2:6, 8);
- Those who have God's Spirit (2:15);
- Those who do not have God's Spirit (2:14);
- Those who have the mind of Christ (2:16).

Yet the Apostle Paul is exercising caution in speaking to the church. His campaign is for change in the church and not necessarily to offend those in authority. Therefore, he uses himself and his identity as an example to measure those who are mature, those who have the Spirit of God and those who have the mind of Christ.

- He is not full of human wisdom, not eloquent, but simply someone who can testify to having encountered the resurrected Christ.
- He is not strong, not courageous and not steady, but he is weak, has great fear and trembling.
- He is not wise or persuasive, but he has demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit.
- He has the mind of Christ.

And so,

One can feel the heavy sadness or deep frustration in the Apostle Paul. He is heartbroken that the church in Corinth could not, or did not, demonstrate the identity, qualities and behaviours that reflected Christ or showed that they had the Spirit of God.

3:1 – They were not spiritual people; instead, they were people of the flesh, motivated by the spirit of their age. They were caught up in the dominant culture of Corinth and, therefore, childlike spiritually.

3:3 – They were emotionally overtaken with jealousy, fearful of losing things they considered precious, and blaming others for their insecurities.

Let's pause here for a brief moment.

Those who have lived, worked or engaged with a jealous person will understand what was happening in the Corinthian church. To clarify, we are not talking about one large congregation but several small gatherings that would meet in people's homes. Therefore, this jealousy might not have been the identity of one person but could have been between churches and multiplied across the congregations in Corinth.

It is not uncommon to think that someone, or an entity – in this case a church – with a jealous tendency might behave irrationally, be over-suspicious of everyone and everything and often unreasonable in their or its behaviour. It is also not uncommon for everyone to adjust their own behaviours, suppress their personalities and even scale back their natural tendencies to avoid provoking the jealous person or entity.

Jealousy is an oasis for quarrels. A quarrel, or an over-exuberant exchange of thoughts, is a sign that we are no longer communicating well. Quarrels manifest themselves in heated arguments, disagreements, bouts of shouting and verbal battles between two or more people. While on some occasions they can have positive outcomes, establishing new parameters and ways of behaving, the converse is also true. They can be the beginning of a breakdown in relationships; in quarrels, people say things that they forever regret.

Yes, the jealousy and quarrelling in Corinth are about the issues [these can be explored if time permits]. But more than that, the critical issue is about the identities we are creating in the process. Jealousy gives us an identity few would be proud of; it harms and destroys relationships. One antidote to jealousy is having confidence in God and in the Spirit of God to take care of the things we find difficult. We can trust God enough to leave our insecurities in His hands. We can release ourselves from the burden and desperation of trying to make relationships work – and doing it rather badly – by giving them over to God.

And so,

There is an opportunity for the Corinthians to adopt new and different identities.

3:9 – 'For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.'

Here are three identities for them to take on:

- God's servants;

- God's field;
- God's building,

We can explore all of these, but let's look at something Christians often don't see ourselves as – God's field.

The context here is not a conservation expanse of land left to its own devices so other creatures can flourish and the biodiversity increase – although this is not a bad idea in the 21st century. Rewilding is good for the planet; it allows nature to find its habitat – insects, birds and animals all find a home in the natural world. The soil can recover when it is left to itself. This is no less than what God had in mind when Israel was required to rest the land. When fields were left to rest in antiquity, it was so that they could recover to better serve their owner.

The Apostle Paul is pointing to a fertile, prosperous and productive field. A field that is cultivated and taken care of, and which provides unique crops based on what was sown. Its identity, therefore, is determined by what grows in it.

We might also observe that the Apostle Paul is not speaking about a walled garden. He is talking about a field that is openly displayed, easily visible and accessible to everyone who passes by. Everyone can make their own assessment of the state and the nature of that field. People can judge for themselves whether the land is being prepared for the sowing of seeds; they can see whether the crops are bursting through the ground; they can see whether the field is in full bloom or whether it is harvest time.

These fields might also take on the character of their season. They are there to support the lives and livelihood of all those who labour in them. Those who depend on them for food, raw materials or commodities can look forward to harvest time. And yes, God's fields flourish; they generate wealth or whatever resources God intended.

And so,

What if we were to borrow the words of the Apostle Paul and suggest that '[we] are God's field'?

Do you believe, like the deist, that God has left us, His fields, to grow untamed, untended, like a rewilding field, so that others might exploit our resources for their own flourishing?

Are we fields that flourish in ways our culture, community, employers and even this church expect of us, but produce little to show we are God's fields?

Are we producing much growth beyond our imaginations, resulting in great admiration, yet very little that demonstrates we belong to Christ?

My sisters and brothers, in God's fields, God makes the decisions on what is planted. In other words, God makes the decisions about you and me.

God's judgements are likely to be very different from those of our culture, national leaders, employers and even those closest and dearest to us.

God's decisions are beyond the limitations imposed by our demographic, ethnicity, gender, accents, where we live and how others look up to or down on us.

The Apostle Paul is provoking us to conceive that any crop that God plants will flourish in his fields; the spiritually mature will flourish; and those who have the Spirit of Christ will flourish.

He is also unequivocal that those who are stirred by jealousy, those who provoke quarrels, and those who embrace the spirit of this age – inequality, injustice, exploitation and the like – are in a different field and will ultimately perish there.

In the Old Testament reading, Moses offers two contrasting options to the people of Israel. We also heard earlier that enslaved Africans were discriminated against even in accessing the Bible.

And so,

I am confident you will not begrudge the opportunity to listen to the passage again. This time, as I read these verses, think of them through the lens of making the choice between God's boundless identity and the identity of the other nations, cultures and gods.

Re-reading Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are

led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

May God's name be praised as we, His people, his church, choose life. Amen

Prayers

As we prepare our hearts to respond in prayer [and Communion], let us sing:

- I feel Jesus

Pray for

- Those wrestling with feelings of jealousy and anger;
- Those who have been hurt by the unreasonable behaviours of others;
- A more just and equitable world;
- Those struggling with their identity markers, that they will be fortified in their identity in God;
- That God's church would be full of life, and be life-giving and life-affirming. Sing again:
- I feel Jesus Invite or offer guidance to those who want to speak to someone or require additional prayers.

Closing song

- Reign in Me, Sovereign Lord OR:
- Over All the Earth

Blessing

May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Whose identity we have received,

Cause us to flourish, prosper and excel in every good work.

May the Holy Spirit give us confidence to display God's glory

In our families, to our friends, to our colleagues and to all who encounter us.

Like fields of corn in the midst of famine, may we be extraordinary sights,

Givers of hope, love and the life of Jesus Christ, our Lord,

Today, and always.

Amen

Scripture verses that can be used

Hosea 12:6 But as for you, return to your God; hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.

Romans 12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Proverbs 22:2 The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.

Acts 10:34-35 Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'

Colossians 3:9-11 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Proverbs 31:8-9 Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, and judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Micah 6:8 And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Amos 5:24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Isaiah 1:17 Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Psalms 82:3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.

Alternative Material

Further resources and opportunities to pray and take action on racial justice-related matters can be found on the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland website:

<https://ctbi.org.uk/racial-justice-sunday-2023-stephen-lawrence/>

More material can be found on the Sanctuary First website for the journey through Lent and for worship gatherings: https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/themes/article_new/the-third-day-lent-march-23

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

- A suggested [playlist of songs for the Season of Epiphany](#) can be found online
- You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.
- CH4 166 – “Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy”
- CH4 198 – “Let us build a house where love can dwell”
- CH4 259 – “Beauty for brokenness”
- CH4 263 – “God of freedom, God of justice”
- CH4 360 – “Jesus Christ is waiting”
- CH4 465 – “Be Thou My Vision”
- CH4 543 – “Longing for light, we wait in darkness”
- CH4 694 – “Brother, sister, let me serve you”

Other hymns suggested by CTBI

- Bring Forth the Kingdom
- Cry Freedom! In the Name of God, and Let the Cry Resound
- Extol the God of Justice
- From Those Forever Shackled
- God Forgave My Sin
- God of Freedom, God of Justice
- God, Your Justice Towers
- God’s Spirit Is in My Heart
- Great God and Lord of the Earth
- How Good it Is, What Pleasure Comes
- How Shall We Sing

Salvation's Song • Jesus Heard with Deep Compassion • My Love for You • They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love • This Is Amazing Grace • True Religion • With the Lord, There Is Mercy and Fulness of Redemption

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?

- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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